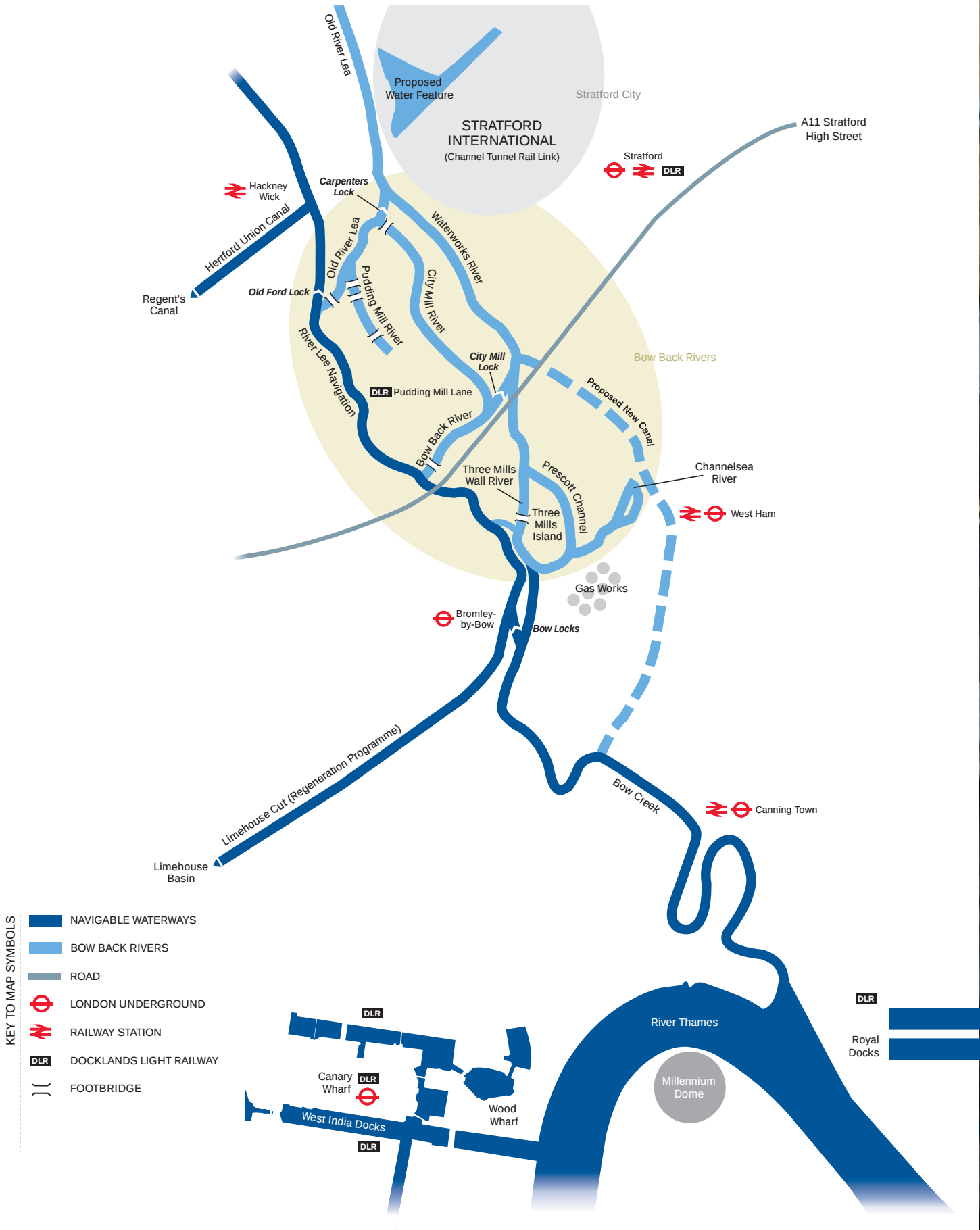
British Waterways
London

NEW LIFE FOR THE BOW BACK RIVERS

BOW BACK RIVERS RESTORATION PROJECT



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INTRODUCTION

The Bow Back Rivers are a hidden network of disused waterways lying between Stratford and Bow in East London. This 5.5km river network threads through approximately 2km^2 of degraded and poorly used land which, despite the neglect, includes rich wildlife habitats and sites of fascinating heritage.

Situated to the north of Canary Wharf and east of the City, nowhere else in London is there such a large expanse of under utilised, waterside land in such a prime location. The Bow Back Rivers are strategically positioned where the Thames Gateway and the London to Stansted regeneration corridors meet. The restoration of the river network and regeneration of the area by a new Urban Development Corporation could transform the Lower Lea Valley into a new water city with a proposed 2km canal at its heart. The location, once transformed, would also provide a quality setting for the 2012 Olympic Games in the event of a successful East London bid.

The area is immediately adjacent to key transport hubs which, with the completion of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link in 2006/7, will also include a gateway to and from Europe.

The full potential of the waterways will not be realised unless a coherent master plan and vision for the future is embraced and implemented by everyone with an interest in the area.

British Waterways London and its partners believe that the Bow Back Rivers have a crucial role to play in the future regeneration of East London. Together we believe that the area could be reborn as an unparalleled water city made up of homes, businesses, parks and urban wildlife habitats which together create a waterfront which can be all things to all people. A place to live, a place to work and most of all a place to enjoy life.

No single organisation can make this ambition become reality. Only through a partnership of public organisations, community groups and private businesses can the full potential of the rivers be unlocked.

HISTORY

The Bow Back Rivers made their first impact during the industrial revolution when they provided water to drive waterwheels at Three Mills and City Mill. In the early 1930s the rivers were improved to accommodate both floodwaters and navigation and, at the time, there was enormous optimism about their potential revival.

"West Ham will be a fashionable boating centre. You will see the elite in blazers and straw hats, pulling their skiffs up and down and having a glorious time. Who knows? There may be motorboat racing and Henley will have to look to its laurels in the matter of regattas."
Stratford Express (18 March 1933)

Unfortunately, after the 1939-45 war, the Bow Back Rivers fell into disuse and, in 1968, the Transport Act classified them as "remainder waterways", effectively restricting expenditure on their improvement to a minimum.

Today the rivers run through a landscape of redundant industry and degraded sites where low value activities are prevalent and visitor interest is low. In parts, the network is heavily silted and as such largely un-navigable. The various structures, although intact, are derelict and unusable.

The potential importance of the network began to be recognised in the early 1990s when regeneration initiatives around Stratford started with the successful "City Challenge" bid. In 1995, British Waterways London and the London Borough of Newham proposed a range of environmental improvements that led to a successful bid for Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) funding and the creation of the Bow Back Rivers Partnership in 1997.

Over the past five years this initiative has undertaken a programme of environmental works and community engagement which has seen Three Mills in particular becoming a focal point for community and schools activity. Partners involved in this work have included Lee Valley Regional Park Authority, Thames Water and the Lea Rivers Trust. Access improvements have started to open up the waterways for local people which in turn has further highlighted the huge unrealised potential of the rivers.

STRATFORD
WEST HAM

CURRENT CONTEXT

A prime location

The location of the Bow Back Rivers places them close to key East London landmarks such as Docklands and Greenwich. They are also in one of the best connected parts of London, immediately adjacent to the new Channel Tunnel Rail Link at Stratford, which has national and international rail links. This area also has good connections to the underground, DLR, cycleways and City Airport. Importantly, the Bow Back Rivers have the potential to once again become an integrated part of Britain's 2,000-mile network of inland waterways, linking the East End with the Lake District and the rest of the UK.

A key part of London's future

The Bow Back Rivers could play an important role in helping London maintain its position as a World City, an opportunity which is recognised by their inclusion in the Mayor's draft London Plan.

"The Mayor will particularly seek the restoration of the Bow Back Rivers system" Policy BR34.

Equally, the restoration of waterways is now Government policy, as set out in *Waterways for Tomorrow*, which recognises and encourages widespread economic, social and environmental benefits of waterway regeneration.

London is very much a water city. From the great River Thames to a myriad of canals, reservoirs, docks and rivers, waterways have played a pivotal role in the growth and prosperity of the city since before the arrival of the Romans.

A catalyst for economic development

In economic terms the restoration of the Bow Back Rivers could make a crucial contribution to the regeneration of the Lower Lea Valley and Thames Gateway, by providing a quality setting for a revitalised residential and business district.

A place to live

The regeneration of the Bow Back Rivers would improve the quality of life for everyone living in and around the area. The project would provide local communities with a cleaner and more accessible place to visit, safer routes between school, home and work and open spaces for all to enjoy. More than anything, the Bow Back Rivers could be transformed from a blight on the landscape to a source of genuine local pride.

Heritage and environment

The Bow Back Rivers have a rich industrial and waterway heritage including Three Mills, the largest tidal mill in the country. Regeneration of the surrounding area would include proposals to protect and restore important local heritage.

Environmentally, the rivers comprise important pockets of wildlife habitats, especially for birds. It is important that any development protects and enhances the Bow Back Rivers' place in the green corridor of the Lee Valley Park. The regeneration of the waterways could help to redress decades of neglect and pave the way for innovative urban wildlife habitat creation schemes, which would benefit water voles, otters and other species. 'Eco-friendly' buildings and improved river transport could create a blueprint for future environmental development in London.

WHAT ARE THE OPTIONS?

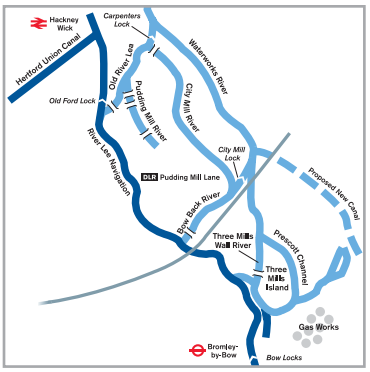
In March 2002, British Waterways London and its partners commissioned a feasibility study from Halcrow Group Ltd to assess the potential impact of the regeneration of the Bow Back Rivers and to provide a basis for consultation. The study highlights a range of options for the future – from doing nothing to full-scale restoration – assessing the costs and the potential benefits of each.

The rivers do not exist in isolation, their restoration must be linked to the regeneration of the surrounding land, flood alleviation, habitat protection and creation, neighbourhood renewal and the development of new business and employment opportunities.

OPTIONS

1 Do nothing

Doing nothing would lead to the continuing decline and dereliction of the rivers and their existing structures. This would encourage further mis-use and degradation, act as a disincentive to investment in the area and create an economic and environmental liability for the future. This blight will be even more difficult for future generations to remedy.



2 The Mill Pool

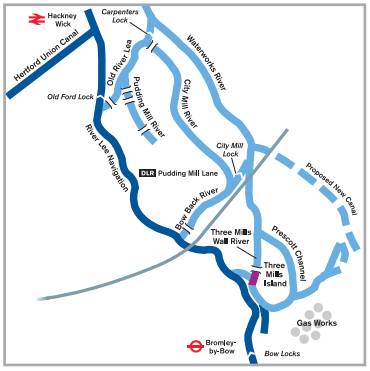
Option two looks at creating a more useable and vibrant water space at Three Mills, in order to aid the regeneration of the entire Three Mills area. Creating a 'Mill Pool' would allow for new and restored uses within the basin, giving visitors to the area more to see and do.

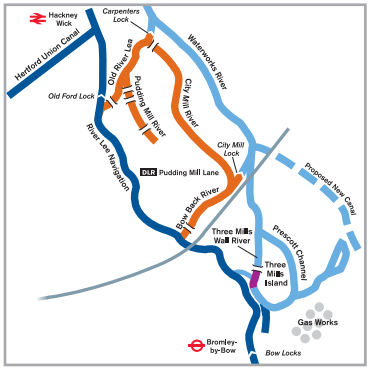
Associated landscape improvements would further enhance the basin surroundings and an ecology zone for re-located mudflats would encourage rarer species to colonise.

3 Restoration of the Bow Back Loop

In addition to the improvement of the Mill Pool, option three would re-open City Mill River, Old River Lea and Bow Back River to create a navigable "loop" of some 3.5km of waterways, which in turn would open up a wide area to development, regeneration opportunities and new visitor attractions.

This, combined with a range of landscape works, improvements to towpaths and the creation of Green Chains, bankside planting and wildlife habitats, will create a place where people choose to live and work.





The area covers two square kilometres and runs from Bow Locks in the south to Bully Point in the north and from Carpenters Road in the east to the borough boundary with Tower Hamlets in the west.

4 Complete restoration

This option would allow navigation of all the Bow Back Rivers at low and medium tides, as was the situation pre-1960. This would allow for the full restoration of the House Mill and its mill wheels. Flood defence terraces could create a significant new asset with ecological, recreational, visual, amenity and flood relief benefits.

Full restoration would provide the impetus for the construction of the proposed new canal and go furthest in creating a new, vibrant water city.

MOVING FORWARD

British Waterways is working in partnerships across the UK to restore and regenerate waterways. During 2002, in partnership with local authorities, businesses, community groups and voluntary organisations, it opened 220 miles of waterway to navigation. In March 2002, British Waterways announced a further nine potential major waterway regeneration schemes, including the Bow Back Rivers.

We need a partnership to create a shared vision and secure funding for the future of the Bow Back Rivers.

Initial discussions with existing and potential partners have revealed a number of aspirations for the future of the area, and a common desire to see the Bow Back Rivers improved. This collective enthusiasm and eagerness to move forward gives us the opportunity to draw together a unique coalition of interests.

We believe that by establishing a 'regeneration' partnership, the Bow Back Rivers can be transformed from an area of blight into a vibrant and dynamic water city created for people to live in, work in and enjoy. A new Amsterdam for the East End.

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British Waterways London

I would like to register my support

If you would like to become actively involved in the regeneration of the Bow Back Rivers and be kept up-to-date with developments, please take a moment to complete and return the attached form. Thank you.

Name:
Company/Organisation:
Position:
Address:
Postcode:
Tel:
Email:

To find out more about the Bow Back Rivers restoration project, please contact:

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